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A Dream Deferred

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MLK ANNUAL UNITY BREAKFAST

January 19, 2005

"A Dream Deferred"

Professor Ruth-Arlene W. Howe

I begin with the Langston Hughes' 1951 poem, from which the title of Lorraine Hansberry's award winning play "Raisin in the Sun" comes and has inspired the title of my remarks this morning –

"Harlem"

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or *does it explode?*

Any reference to Dr. King's ideas and dreams immediately evokes memories of beautiful prose and speeches, inspiring us to imagine the society he envisioned in his 1963 "I have a Dream" speech. But, Dr. King also was a man of deeds through which he modeled strong convictions of belief and mission with self-sacrificing steadfastness. While his birthday is now celebrated widely, acceptance of it for many came slowly, begrudgingly, or not at all. Hailed well by officialdom today, as noted in a Jan. 14th piece by Diversity, Inc.com staff, it was not until November 1983: despite a rigorous campaign opposing the King holiday by former

President Reagan through the auspices of the rabid King-hater, former North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms, [that] the 15-year request for a King holiday [was] signed into law by Reagan.

Let's not forget that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was a strategist for social change. He opposed the status quo of his day and helped end legal segregation. While President Johnson managed to get the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 passed and launched the War on Poverty, our increasing involvement in Vietnam deprived and diverted needed resources from domestic programs – initiatives untaken to fight poverty and eliminate segregation.

Those of us who are of Dr. King's generation, know vividly how racially divided 20th century America was. Segregation was in force and enforced. And, alas, continues today. What's the true, unrecognized and undiscussed implication of the 2004 election result divides between the "red" and "blue" states?

By the year of his assassination Dr. King had come to realize that he had to dedicate himself to fighting poverty if he was to be relevant in the lives of poor African-Americans and others. He spent three years in Chicago familiarizing himself with the urban poor. His death prevented him from attending the May 1968 Poor People's March which he helped to plan in order to focus public attention on the urban program initiatives from which the war in Vietnam was draining resources.

Dr. King's tactics were to utilize his preaching skills to organize demonstrations and marches. It's important not to forget that the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations all viewed the Movement with great suspicion. Many considered him a communist and a subversive threat to

public order. After all, it was Robert Kennedy, as Attorney General of the United States, who gave the FBI signed orders to wiretap and carefully watch King himself and his aides. Such draconian powers of surveillance of "movement" leaders and followers provided precedent for enactment of the Patriot Act after 9/11.

He did not play a quid pro quo sort of politics. He would not endorse a candidate. He would not say what he was told to say or refrain from saying. Instead, he said or did what was needed. He spoke the truth. In that sense he was a free radical - the darling of the Left, but the embodiment of evil for the Right. He was Dr. King, the Nobel Laureate, to some; Martin Luther Coon to others. He provoked a backlash and blow back from the conservative right.

His legacy is more than the good feelings people declare on his birthday. It's the mirror his life places before not just his fellow African-Americans, but before all his American countrymen and women, and our government. We all have our personal recollections of things that he said or did. For me it was speaking out about the war in Vietnam that continues to resonate and ring as true today as when he delivered his "A Time to Break Silence" historic address at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967 - exactly one year to the day before his assassination in Memphis. He eloquently declared his opposition to the War in Vietnam. President Johnson felt personally attacked by King who he thought was an ally. King was banned from the White House.

I think it only fitting to share several passages from that address with you.

Now, King opened thus:

I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other choice. . . . The recent statement of your executive committee are the sentiments of my own heart and I found myself in full accord when I read its opening lines: "*A time comes when silence is betrayal.*"

King, recognizing that it was not easy to be against government policy, especially when the nation was at war, said:

Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. . . .

In lamenting the destruction and loss of life caused by the fighting, he said: this:

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: Why are *you* speaking about war, Dr. King? Why are *you* joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say. Aren't you hurting the cause of your people, they ask? And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live.

As he moved into explaining the Importance of Vietnam – he began:

Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision.

. . . .

After stating two reasons, he said:

My third reason moves to an even deeper level of awareness. . . out of my experience in the ghettos of the North over the last three years. . . As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I . . . tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked – and rightly so--- what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent.

If he were here with us today he would be calling us to break our silence about this war in Iraq which is killing too many Iraqis, killing and maiming too many of our young men, and wasting too much of our resources. He would be calling on us to link hands with each other and to give support to the efforts of Congressman Martin Meehan in asking for an exit plan. He would be asking us to urge our government to exchange violence for non-violence, diplomatic initiative for military preemption.

Dr. King would urge us to remember:

. . . Our only hope today lies in our ability to . . . go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust more and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain."

. . . .

He would:

call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation which is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men. . .

He'd explain:

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. If we love one another God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day. We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. . . .

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. . . . We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.

We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world – a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

And so I close, on the eve of the start of a second Bush Administration, with an earnest prayer that all key governmental officials and all Americans remember and heed the truth Dr. King spoke about Vietnam, and apply it to our present global involvements; that they believe in and embrace my favorite verse of scripture – 2d Timothy 1:7

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.